

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

There's a story told of a young student at Temple University in Philadelphia. For those of you who don't know, Temple is located in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city. In any event, the young girl received a note from her Grandmother in Oklahoma. She was delighted to find a \$10.00 bill attached. As she sat in the second floor window of her apartment, pondering what small delight with which she could treat herself, she noticed a shabbily dressed stranger down below, leaning against a post in front of her building. She couldn't get him off her mind. Deciding he was in greater need than she was, she slipped the \$10. into an envelope and quickly wrote the words, "Don't despair". She threw it out the window, where the stranger picked it up, opened it, and smiled as he tipped his hat and went away.

The next day as she was leaving her building, the stranger, still dressed in the same shabby clothes, suddenly appeared, reached out and handed her a roll of bills. She asked, "What's this". He said, "That's the sixty bucks you won, Lady. Don't Despair paid five to one.

Ah, what a blessing it would be if all of our good works reaped such quick and generous rewards. But, that isn't the way it usually goes, does it? Nor do I suspect that is necessarily God's way either. As St. James intimates and Jesus speaks plainly to us this evening, for the good works that proceed from our faith in Christ, God intends an eternal reward, probably not an earthly one.

Take our Gospel text for example. Peter, wonderful, brash, big-mouth, big-hearted Peter, when Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" boisterously proclaims, "You are the Christ!"

Now, according to Matthew's account which we read in the 16th Chapter of his Gospel, Jesus immediately praises Peter and rewards him by telling him, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock, I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven."

Now, both Mark and Matthew agree, that after making this proclamation, Jesus proceeds to tell his disciples what it means to be the Christ—he will suffer, be rejected, and killed, and then rise again. Peter couldn't stand the thought that his friend, his mentor, his rabbi would ever have to undergo such treatment. He pulls Jesus aside and says, according to Matthew, "God forbid, any such thing should happen to you!"

Again, both Mark and Matthew agree, the Lord rips into Peter, “Get behind me, you Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as humans do.” Within minutes, Jesus, on the one hand praises Peter and entrusts to him the task of building his church; then on the other condemns him as being so full of evil, so filled with sin, as to be Satan himself.

What are we to make of this dichotomy? Perhaps this Gospel passage is given to us today as we struggle to comprehend the situation we find ourselves in today. As I’ve said in previous weeks, our Church has become “an abomination before God and humanity” because of the clergy sexual abuse of children and the cruel, insensitive, and self-serving handling of these crimes by some of our bishops.

As we relate this to our Gospel passage tonight, we can recognize that the Lord entrusted the birth, the development, and the caring of his church to a mere, mortal human being. He knew Peter was not a perfect man, who immediately reveals his weak and sinful nature, which will be compounded later on when he even denies knowing Christ, not once, not twice, but three times.

From that time to this Jesus knew that he was bestowing “the keys to the kingdom of heaven” to mere weak, sinful, mortal human beings who will fail in every miserable way that humans can fail. Still he says, “The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” In other words, Christ is saying no matter how evil those who lead it may be, his Church will stand and overcome the very gates of hell.

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The Lord is telling us tonight that no matter how dark this time is; no matter how hurt and angry and disillusioned we may be; no matter the shame that has been smeared on all of us by these scandals, the Church will stand; the Church will prevail.

Our faith is that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, who has suffered, died, and risen and the work of his redeeming love continues today in this Church that he established to stand firm forever. And he has promised us that he will come back again to claim for his heavenly Father, a Church that is pure, spotless, and without blemish.

We are surely not there yet, but that is the clear projectory that we are on. And that is why, even in the darkness, the distress, and the shame of this present moment, we need to gently, but firmly; humbly, but proudly; shamefully, yet courageously hold each other up in living our faith in this Catholic Church, established on the rock who is Peter, to become the Church for which the Lord will return; one that is pure, spotless, and without blemish.